

Angry Farmers and Heatwaves: The Climate in India's Elections

Article by Raluca Besliu

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In India's ongoing elections, economic and social issues are intertwined with rising temperatures and declining agricultural harvests. While Indian farmers are the worst affected, the climate path of the world's most populous country and third-largest emitter affects us all – and there are things the EU could do to help.

The world's largest democratic exercise is currently underway, with Indian voters heading to the polls for nationwide elections. In this elaborate and lengthy process, spanning from 19 April to 1 June, nearly one billion Indians will elect 543 representatives to the lower house, known as the Lok Sabha. The outcome will define the country's leadership: polls predict the incumbent, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and his right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), will win a clear victory, with the main opposition, the centre-left National Congress Party, trailing far behind.

With the world's fastest-expanding economy and a young and growing population, India grapples with a multitude of issues. Of key concern to the Indian electorate is the persistent challenge of unemployment, slightly higher than in 2014 when Modi came to power with promises of widespread job creation. The rise of an aggressive Hindu nationalism under Modi's leadership, which promotes Hindu "values" as intrinsically those of the nation, has also stirred unease among religious minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians.

Yet while these important issues dominate the headlines, something else lurks beneath the surface: climate change. It subtly shapes voter demands through the lens of anxieties about livelihoods and welfare, as growing parts of the electorate experience its harsh consequences first-hand in the form of scorching droughts, heatwaves, and torrential rains.

India is the world's third-largest carbon emitter. Given its critical role in global climate action, the implications of the election outcome extend far beyond the country's borders. The EU and other global stakeholders should thus closely monitor its results not just for the impact they will have on domestic affairs, but for international climate efforts.

Electoral promises

The BJP and Congress share some similarities but also have key differences in their approach to the climate. The vast majority of India's energy needs are currently met by coal, oil, and solid biomass. In 2023 alone, more than 90 per cent of India's oil was sourced from abroad (a third of it from Russia). In its manifesto for the current elections, the BJP has accordingly reaffirmed its commitment to attaining energy independence by 2047, and to achieving net-zero emissions by 2070. These come alongside efforts to bolster river health and disaster preparedness. The party's manifesto however sidesteps discussing plans for transitioning away from coal, which now provides 70 per cent of India's electricity and helps to power its economic growth.

Congress' proposals are more ambitious than the BJP's. Although its manifesto also avoids the issue of

coal use, it fuses widespread concerns around unemployment with those related to climate change. Out of this come initiatives like the “[Green New Deal Investment Programme](#)” and a “Green Transition Fund” to create millions of jobs in energy transition, including in rural areas. Congress is also the only party promising to increase funding for India’s National Adaptation Fund, an entity established in 2015 to meet the [climate adaptation costs](#) for India’s most vulnerable territories. Yet while Congress’ proposals appear promising, it remains unclear how they would be financed and implemented.

Climate impacts

India’s climate vulnerability is acutely evident. The country’s average temperatures have risen by 0.7 degrees Celsius since the beginning of the 20th century, according to a [study](#) by India’s Ministry of Earth Sciences (MOES). Even slight increases in temperature [can contribute](#) to extreme weather events like heatwaves, drought, flooding, and melting glaciers. The effects play out across the country’s vast landmass. In the Himalayan region of Sikkim in late 2023, a cloudburst – the sudden release of heavy rainfall – caused a glacial lake to burst, [flooding nearby regions](#) and claiming over 30 lives. Several analysts [attributed](#) it to glacial retreat and other climate-induced factors.

In regions of India with a tropical climate, rising temperatures meanwhile lead to increased moisture retention in the air, resulting in less frequent rainfall. When rain does occur, it comes in [concentrated bursts](#), delivering the equivalent of a week or month’s worth of precipitation in just a few hours or days. This pattern makes monsoon rainfall more severe and erratic, increasing the intensity of floods.

The effect of rising temperatures is already being felt. As voting in the current election began in April, many regions were gripped by a searing heatwave, with daytime temperatures reaching 46 degrees Celsius. India’s Meteorological Department [warned](#) that this heatwave would persist until June, prompting the Union Minister for Earth Sciences to call for immediate precautionary measures to ensure a smooth election process. The Election Commission also expressed concerns about the [high temperatures’](#) impact on voter turnout, extending polling time in some parts of the country by a few hours to [increase participation](#).

Agriculture under pressure

Climate change will likely impact one group of Indians more than any other: farmers. But if theirs are the hands that feed the nation, then the knock-on effect of extreme weather events and other climate-related phenomena on the agricultural sector will ripple out much further than just that community.

Agriculture is India’s lifeblood. In 2021, alongside related sectors, it employed a staggering [43 per cent of the workforce](#) and contributed 19 per cent of the national GDP. Over 250 million farmers and informal labourers – in other words, around a quarter of the entire electorate – [earn their livelihoods](#) from agriculture, making them a highly influential voter bloc.

Agricultural output is critical for food security in a nation of 1.4 billion citizens, which ranked [111 out of 125](#) in the 2023 Global Hunger Index. To support the most vulnerable and marginalised, government programmes offer subsidised or free grains – for example, the programme to grant [free wheat and rice](#) to 800 million people, which was recently extended for five years.

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However, climate change is throwing a wrench into this vital system, affecting crop growth, water availability, and soil health. This is leading to reduced yields and crop failure. In the past two years alone, India's wheat harvest dropped due to severe heatwaves in March and April. Studies predict even steeper future declines: wheat yields could plummet by 23 per cent by 2050, and rice by 15 per cent by 2100. The economic cost is already immense, with estimates suggesting that in the years leading up to 2017, India was losing 10 billion euros annually in agricultural output due to climate change.

For farmers, who must purchase seeds, fertilisers, and other agricultural necessities, crop failure can lead to crippling debt, pushing some to leave agriculture and migrate to cities to join the unskilled labour force – or even to commit suicide: between 2015 and 2023, over 10,000 farmers took their own life in India.

Farmers protesting

This increasing precariousness has led farmers to protest. The most recent major protests started in 2020, when Modi passed three laws that would have loosened rules around the sale, pricing, and storage of farm produce, thereby weakening the protections Indian farmers had long enjoyed from the vicissitudes of the free market.

Most Indian farmers sell the majority of their produce at government-controlled wholesale markets. These have assured floor prices, known as minimum support prices (MSP). Without them, many farmers would struggle to survive, especially in the face of climate-induced crop failures. Modi's plans would have allowed farmers to sell their produce at a market price directly to private players.

The proposed legal changes made farmers fear they would be left vulnerable to market fluctuations and exploitation by allowing India's few agribusiness corporations to dictate prices, especially in years with too much market supply. This could eventually lead to the dismantling of the MSP system as a whole.

To counter these laws, hundreds of thousands of farmers responded with a year-long protest in New Delhi. Their protest became a potent challenge to the Modi government and one of the largest social movements in recent Indian history. The government eventually dropped the proposed farm laws at the end of 2021, but then reneged on commitments to discuss the farmers' demands, such as introducing a legal guarantee for MSP to help stabilise their incomes.

Since the beginning of 2024, with the elections approaching, the farmers have returned to the streets of New Delhi – only this time, they have articulated their demands specifically linked to the threat posed by climate change. Central to their campaign is a legal guarantee for MSP on 23 crops, including more climate-resilient varieties. While this already exists in theory, in practice, MSP only covers rice and wheat, two water-intensive cultures. This incentivises farmers to grow them even in areas with water scarcity, harming the environment and long-term sustainability. Expanding MSP with a legal guarantee would empower farmers to choose a wider range of crops, ones better suited to their local climate and water availability.

The government's free market ideology clashes with the farmers' demands for guaranteed income. While the BJP is promising to hold discussions, Congress has said that if elected, it will pass the MSP.

Whether Congress' electoral strategy will work remains to be seen. Since many Indian farmers are Hindu – and since Hindu farmers constitute 85 per cent of rural landowners – will their religious affiliation outweigh their economic concerns when voting?

Slow progress

While farmers are at the forefront of India's climate struggles, the crisis extends far beyond rural areas. Major cities like Bengaluru, a hub of innovation, are facing water scarcity, while New Delhi grapples with increasingly destructive monsoon floods. This growing threat has spurred the government to place stronger emphasis on climate mitigation and adaptation in recent years. Some progress has been made, particularly in renewable energy: India boasts the world's fifth-largest solar market, aiming for 30 per cent solar power generation by 2040.

Yet the Climate Change Tracker still deems India's actions insufficient compared to fair-share contributions for limiting global temperature rise. India's net-zero target of 2070 lags substantially behind the Paris Agreement's 2050 goal. Its heavy reliance on coal, with production and consumption expanding, not shrinking, is a major reason for this. The dependence increases during heatwaves, when demand for electricity for cooling spikes. As the country heats up, therefore, the burning of coal intensifies.

Balancing act

India's challenge, therefore, is a delicate balancing act: achieving economic development to meet the basic needs and improve the livelihoods of its more than one billion people while urgently addressing national and global climate targets. This requires substantial resources, and Modi has been a vocal advocate for increased financial support from developed countries, most recently demanding that at least 1 trillion US dollars is paid annually to assist developing countries in their energy transition. He often makes his argument by pointing to the Global North's historical responsibility for climate change.

His demands open a door for strengthened EU-India relations. The EU, some of whose members are major historical emitters, could respond to India's request by boosting its financial aid for mitigation and adaptation in developing nations.

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Yet the collaboration could go beyond finance. Sharing expertise on renewable energy and joint ventures in clean technologies like battery storage and smart grids could significantly accelerate India's transition. The ongoing negotiations for a free trade agreement (FTA) between the EU and India, while carrying the potential to deepen economic relations, also hold implications for India's environmental health. By pressuring sectors such as agriculture to expand in order to meet increased demand, there is the likelihood that carbon emissions will also greatly increase.

The EU has recognised this. Rather than shift the burden of responsibility for the energy transition exclusively to India, it should therefore share it through provision of technical expertise and financial

support.

India's population size and development trajectory make it a critical player in global climate efforts. With climate change impacting an increasingly large part of the Indian population, the incumbent leadership will have to balance India's economic development and job creation with cutting emissions. Whether the BJP, the likely victor in this year's elections, can accomplish this comes down to its capacity to create an all-encompassing vision for India's future.



Raluca Besliu is originally from Romania, but currently lives in Belgium. She is interested in Romanian and Eastern European affairs, human rights issues, and global governance.

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